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November 22, 1961

Mr. Edward P. Henderson
U.S. National Museum
Washington 25, D.C.

Dear Mr. Henderson:

Harold Urey, in the course of a meeting of the Space Science Board last week, called my attention to a paper by Claus and Nagy on 'A Microbiological Examination of Some Carbonaceous Chondrites' that they had submitted for publication in Nature. This paper is bound to arouse a considerable amount of controversy; I am quite ready to admit my own profound skepticism of the conclusion that an extraterrestrial fossil will be so readily found, irrespective of the question whether life has developed elsewhere in the solar system.

We are actively involved in the development of instrumentation for the detection of planetary life and can hardly escape the challenge that specimens of this kind should afford the cytochemical techniques that we are working on. You will have judged the purpose of my letter and I hope you have the possibility of acceding to our earnest request for a small sample of Ureuell with which to pursue an independent corroboration or test of the Claus-Nagy report. We are well set up now for microchemistry on small samples and should not require more than, at most, 100 milligrams on the basis of the published claim. We would propose to do a somewhat more thorough job of cytochemical investigation including ultraviolet microscopy and absorption spectra. With the cooperation of Professor Djerassi in the Chemistry Department, we also will have access to the best contemporary instrumentation for semimicroanalysis by mass spectrometry and infrared spectrometry; and with Dr. Pattee to do X-ray microanalysis. An even smaller quantity of material might suffice for somewhat less extensive microscopic study if we were lucky enough to find the same forms that are described.

If it is possible for you to meet our request I would very much like to be present when the sample is taken. Fortunately, my colleague Dr. Elliott Levinthal and I will be in Washington for a NASA consultation on the 27 and 28 and I would appreciate your leaving a message for me at the Mayflower Hotel the morning of the 27th if we could meet with you. Alternatively, a phone call or wire collect to me here before my departure Monday night would encourage me to bring a packet of sterilized instruments and container for the purpose. My telephone number here is Davenport 1-1200, ext. 5049.

Needless to say I would be most grateful to you for your cooperation in helping us clear up this disturbing question.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

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